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# THE MUSIC OF EDWARD MACDOWELL.

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN.

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WHEN Mr. Ernest Newman, an English critic of acuity, remarked in a recent essay that the Romantic movement in music had "done its work,"—though "even in our own day it still makes an occasional ineffectual effort to raise its old head, ludicrous now with its faded garlands of flowers,"—it must doubtless have seemed to many that he spoke with point and justification. Indisputably, the Romanticism which Mr. Newman meant—the Romanticism which expended itself in the fabrication of a paste-board world of "gloomy forests, enchanted castles, impossible maidens, and the obsolete profession of magic"—has had its day, and now seems, in the retrospect, incredibly puerile, incredibly fatuous and wrong. But this was the Romanticism of perverted sentiment—a false thing, a mistaken thing, a thing of "vain shows and shadows and ideals." There is another Romance: a spirit incomparably fresh and vital, a primeval impulse and aspiration, that is not barren and moribund, but quick and increasing. "Through the heart," says Fiona Macleod, in one of her most persuasive pages, "through the heart, I go to lost gardens, to mossed fountains, to groves where is no white beauty of still statue, but only the beauty of an old forgotten day." There, by those fountains, and in those groves and gardens, flowers that immemorial Romance of the transforming imagination. It is a Romance that is in no wise divorced from reality—that is, in fact, but reality imaginatively apprehended; if it uses the old romanticistic properties, it uses them, not as substantives, but as symbols of intense emotional realities. For the essential romanticist and the essential realist are fundamentally at one—save for differences that are merely temperamental—in their primary purpose to represent "the thing as in itself it really

is"; and it is in no sort an accusation against realism if one attempts to define those differences by saying that, in its most undivided estate, the romantic spirit concerns itself with essences rather than with details, with impressions rather than with documents, with the heightened expression of spiritual substance rather than with literal representation. Which is merely to say that it deals in a truth that is no less truth because it is reflected imaginatively, and through a beauty that may often be in the last degree incalculable and aërial.

It is this authentic spirit of romance that has an exquisite life in certain music of to-day—preëminently, I think, and in a most complete and notable degree, in the work of a contemporary American composer, Edward MacDowell, whose recent abandonment of the Chair of Music at Columbia University, to allow of an uninterrupted devotion to composition, gives sufficient pertinence to a present consideration of his achievements. I account Mr. MacDowell so notably a romantic of the finest attainment because, true to the deeper genius of his art, he devotes himself, in his practice of it, to a rendering, extraordinary for vividness and felicity, of those essences and impressions which have seemed to me to be the ultimate concern of the romantic spirit in its dealings with life. He has chosen occasionally to employ, in the realization of his purposes, what seems at first to be precisely the magical apparatus so necessary to the older romanticism. Dryads and elves inhabit his world, and he dwells at times under faery boughs and in enchanted woods; but for him, as for the poets of the Celtic tradition, these things are but the manifest images of an interior passion and delight. Seen in the transfiguring mirror of his music, the moods and events of the natural world and of the incessant drama of psychic life are vivified into shapes and designs of irresistible beauty and appeal.

Both in theory and in practice, Mr. MacDowell stands uncompromisingly for music that is, of intention, persistently pictorial and impressionistic. Thus his themes are Lancelot and Elaine, Arthur, the Gaelic Cuchullin, the sea, a deserted farm, a water-lily, meadow-brooks and will-o'-the-wisps, starlight, a haunted house, a wild rose: a poet, it will be observed, thrall to "the mystery and the majesty of earth," although scarcely less thrall to purely human emotion. If one is, at times, inclined to praise in him the poet of the natural world at the expense of the

musical humanist, it is because he is, constitutionally and by right of ancestry, Celtic of the Celts, with the Celt's intimate vision of natural things, and his magic power of poetically vivifying them. It is making no transcendent claim for him to affirm that, in such splendid fantasies as his "To the Sea," "In Mid-Ocean," "In Deep Woods"; in such exquisite impressions as "Starlight," "To a Water-lily," "To a Wild Rose," there is an inevitable felicity, a graphic nearness and beauty, an imaginative intensity and lyric fervor which exist nowhere in external tone-painting save in Mr. MacDowell's own work.

Music, of course,—from Hadyn to Wagner and Raff,—abounds in examples of eloquent natural imagery; one need not, in claiming a certain excellence for him, imply that Mr. MacDowell has ever threatened the supremacy of such things as the "Rheingold" Vorspiel or the "Walküre" fire music. It is as much in his choice of subjects as in the peculiar vividness and felicity of his expression, that he is unique among tone-poets of the external world. He has never attempted such tremendous frescoes as Wagner delighted to paint; nor does he choose to deal with the elements—with winds and waters, with fire and clouds and tempests—in the epical manner of the great music-dramatist. Of his descriptive music by far the greater part is written for the piano; so that, at the start, a very definite limitation is imposed upon magnitude of plan. You cannot achieve on the piano, with any adequacy of effect, a mountain-side in flames, or a storm at sea, or the prismatic arch of a rainbow; and as Mr. MacDowell has seen fit to employ that instrument as his principal medium of expression, he has refrained from attempting to advance musical fresco-painting beyond the point at which Wagner left it. Instead, he has contented himself with such themes as he treats in his "Forest Idyls," in his "Four Little Poems" ("The Eagle," "The Brook," "Moonshine," "Winter"), in his first orchestral suite, in the inimitable "Woodland Sketches" and "Sea Pieces," and in the recently published "New England Idyls." As a perfect exemplification of his practice, consider, let me say, his "To a Water-lily," from the "Woodland Sketches,"—than which I know of nothing in objective tone-painting, for the piano or for the orchestra, more sensitively felt, more exquisitely accomplished. The method is the method of Shelley in the "Sensitive Plant," of Wordsworth in "The Daffodils," as it is

the method of Raff rather than of Wagner—although Raff could never have written with precisely that order of delicate eloquence. The thing is steeped in loveliness, in sheer natural magic. So in his “Wild Rose,” in his “Starlight,” in his “To the Sea,”—always he is the admirable poet, intent upon realizing, through his chosen medium, a deep and intimate vision of the natural world. And he can persuade you, too, with Forgael, of “the streams where the world ends—”

“Where time is drowned in odor-laden winds  
And druid moons, and murmuring of boughs. . . .”

It would be unjust, though it would not be inexcusable, to give too great a prominence, in considering Mr. MacDowell’s work, to his poetry of nature. If, in his own field, he is unapproachable as the poet of the “Woodland Sketches,” he challenges great achievements as the author of the “Four Songs” (*Op.* 56), “A Deserted Farm,” “Told at Sunset,” the “Scotch Poem,” the four sonatas, and certain of the “New England Idyls.” Here, certainly, are profound emotion, a deep and transporting tenderness,—an “eloquence of the heart,”—in which again one is tempted to trace the essential Celt.

To take him at his best and most representative, let me consider in detail that work of his in which he has attained, as I believe, to the summit of his present powers: the “Keltic” Sonata, his Fourth in E minor (*Op.* 59). Mr. MacDowell’s genius has here found its consummate flowering: nowhere else in his work are its distinguishing traits so strikingly disclosed—the breadth and reach of imagination, the magnetic vitality, the richness and fervor, the conquering poetic charm. It is, so far as he has gone, his ripest work—a higher flight than its forerunner, the “Norse,” as that, in its turn, surpasses the earlier “Eroica” and “Tragica.”

It was a fortunate, if not an inevitable, event, in view of his temperamental affiliations with the Celtic genius, that Mr. MacDowell should have been made aware of the suitability for musical treatment of the ancient heroic chronicles of the Gaels, and that he should have gone for his inspiration, in particular, to the legends comprised in the famous Cycle of the Red Branch. In a motto which he prefixes to the Sonata, he gives this index to its poetic content:

“Who minds now Keltic tales of yore,  
Dark Druid rhymes that thrall,  
Deirdré's song and wizard lore  
Of great Cuchullin's fall.”

Mr. MacDowell has attempted no mere musical recounting of those romances of the ancient Gaelic world at which he hints in these lines. He has aimed to make his music, he says, “more a commentary on the subject than an actual depiction of it”; but to say that he has realized vividly and beautifully all that this denotes—all that which is essentially implicit in the source of his inspiration—would be but a niggardly statement of the truth. It would be juster to say, rather, that he has recalled in his music the very life and presence of the Gaelic prime—that he has “unbound the Island harp.” Above all, he has achieved that “heroic beauty” which, believes Mr. Yeats, has been fading out of the arts since “that decadence we call progress set voluptuous beauty in its place”—that heroic beauty which is of the very essence of the imaginative life of the primitive Celts, and which the Celtic “revival” in contemporary letters has so singularly failed to recrudescence. For it is the heroic Gaelic world that Mr. MacDowell has made to live again in his music: that miraculous world of superhuman passions and aspirations, of bards and heroes and sublime adventure—the world of Cuchullin the Unconquerable, and Laeg, and Queen Meave; of Naesi, and Deirdré the Beautiful, and Fergus, and Connla the Harper.

That this is music which challenges the imagination is undeniable. It makes small appeal to the tonal sense *per se*—to the sense which craves in music merely, in Wagner's phrase, “the susciting of pleasure in beautiful forms.” Mr. MacDowell does not write what we presume to call “absolute” music; if one looks to such a work as the “Keltic” Sonata for the kind of gratification which he is accustomed to derive from, for example, a Brahms symphony, he will not find it. It is impossible to account satisfactorily for the last page of the “Keltic” upon exclusively musical grounds: it is as essentially—though not so avowedly—programmatic as the “Scotch Poem” of *Op.* 31; and, like that hauntingly tragic paraphrase, its ultimate appeal is conditioned upon an understanding of the basis of drama and emotional crisis upon which the musician has built. Ernest Newman

has effectually exposed the absurdity of the popular sophistry which concedes the legitimacy of programme music so long as it sounds "as well as absolute music to any one who does not know the story"; so I need not concern myself with a quite superfluous apology for Mr. MacDowell's indifference to the dicta of the absolutists. But while I must admit his usual indifference, I cannot help wishing that he might contrive some expedient for doing away, so far as he himself is concerned, with the sonata form which he occasionally uses, rather inconsistently, as a vehicle for the expression of that vision and emotion that are in him; for, generally speaking, and in spite of the triumphant success of the "Keltic," Mr. MacDowell is less fortunate in his sonatas than in those freer and more elastically wrought tone-poems in which he voices a mood or an experience with epigrammatic concision and directness. The "Keltic" sonata succeeds in spite of its form—as the earlier "Norse," "Eroica," and "Tragica" sonatas do not at all points—through sheer force of inspiration; though even here, and notwithstanding the freedom of manipulation, one feels that he would have worked to still finer ends in a more flexible and fluent form. He is never so compelling, so uniquely and persuasively eloquent, as in those impressionistically conceived pieces in which he moulds his inspiration upon the events of an interior emotional programme, rather than upon a musical formula necessarily arbitrary and anomalous,—in such things, for instance, as the "Idyls" and "Poems" after Goethe and Heine, the "Woodland Sketches," the "Sea Pieces," the "Fire-side Tales," the "New England Idyls," the orchestral suite (*Op.* 42), and the symphonic poems—"Hamlet and Ophelia," "Lancelot and Elaine," "The Saracens" and "Lovely Alda" (after the Song of Roland). Here he is invulnerably himself: here, from first to last, the work is the work of a master of imaginative expression, a penetrative psychologist, above all, an exquisite poet.

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